



# FRIENDS and FAMILY MOURN TRAGIC DEATH of BRANDON LEE

WILMINGTON, NC—Actor and martial artist Brandon Lee, the son of the legendary Bruce Lee, died here March 31 after apparently being shot in the abdomen during the filming of *The Crow*, a \$14-million movie that was due to be released this summer. He was 28.

Lee was fatally wounded on a set while filming a scene that was to include simulated gunfire and the use of a .44-caliber handgun. In the scene, filmed shortly after midnight on Soundstage Four at Carolco Studios, Lee walked through a doorway carrying a bag of groceries when he was fired on from about 15 feet away by actor Michael Massee, who plays a villain. The gun was supposed to be "loaded" with blank and dummy cartridges only; the grocery bag contained a small explosive charge that was to be used to simulate gunfire. When Massee fired the gun, Lee was to activate a toggle switch underneath the

*Brandon Lee (above), the son of martial arts legend Bruce Lee, died March 31 after being shot in the abdomen on a movie set. He was 28 years old. His father was only 32 years old when he passed away in 1973.*

grocery bag and set off the small charge. But after Massee fired, Lee collapsed.

Lee was treated at the scene by emergency medical technicians, and was admitted shortly after 1 a.m. to New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington with a "penetrating wound to the abdomen," said Cathy Painter, administrator of corporate communications and community relations for the hospital. Lee was undergoing cardiopulmonary resuscitation when he arrived at the hospital and had detectable vital signs, but he was unresponsive, according to Painter.

"He was stabilized as best possible and taken urgently to surgery," Painter

***Bruce Lee's Son  
is Shot Down  
on Film Set***

by Douglas Jeffrey



Lee was placed in the medical center's trauma-neuro intensive care unit shortly after 7 a.m., but his condition progressively deteriorated, Painter said. Lee was pronounced dead at 1:04 p.m. The cause of death was "intestinal injuries, major vascular injuries and extensive bleeding," she said.

The projectile that caused Lee's death reportedly left a hole the size of a silver dollar in the actor's abdomen, and the object lodged against his spine.

The Wilmington Police Department has classified the incident as an accidental shooting and was continuing its investigation as this issue of *Black Belt* went to press.

On the day Lee died, officials were uncertain what caused the fatal injury. Police speculated that the projectile that killed Lee came from the gun used in the scene or from the explosive device in the grocery bag Lee was carrying—or both.

"The exact origin of the projectile cannot be determined until an autopsy and laboratory examinations are completed," said Linda Rawley, a public information officer with the Wilmington Police Department.

During an autopsy the day after Lee's death, doctors at Onslow Memorial Hospital in Jacksonville, North Carolina, removed "what appeared to be a .44-caliber bullet from Lee's body," Rawley said. Police, however, were not labeling the incident a homicide, although they had questioned Massee.

"We still consider this an accident until something else shows up otherwise," said police Sergeant R.E. Norvell.

Police were waiting for the results of a state Bureau of Investigation ballistics test, which would determine if the object removed from Lee's abdomen was actually a bullet.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the Wilmington Police Department recovered a .44-caliber handgun from the movie set and what appeared to be two spent shell casings. One casing was from a blank round and the other from a "dummy" bullet—bullet facsimiles which are placed in the gun cylinder so the weapon appears loaded in close-up shots.

Detective Rodney Simmons, the first officer at the scene of the shooting, told the *Times* that Lee's injury appeared to be a gunshot wound. Simmons learned that one of the dummy shells in the gun was missing the facsimile slug from its tip, the *Times* said. The possibility exists, Simmons told the newspaper, that the slug had somehow become dislodged



Photo courtesy of Warner Brothers

from the dummy shell casing and the tip remained in the cylinder or barrel when the weapon was unloaded. When a blank round was later inserted, the pistol could have discharged like a loaded firearm, Simmons said.

Tom Muzila, a partner in the Santa Ana, California-based firm Battlecry Productions, which choreographs movie fight and battle scenes and trains actors how to shoot automatic weapons, questioned this theory.

"Unless the man with the gun was real close to Lee, I don't see how it could have done that much damage," Muzila said. "I don't see how a piece of metal could have done that."

During his initial investigation, Sim-

mons discovered that a special-effects employee, who he would not identify, loaded the gun for the fatal scene, and not Massee. Furthermore, the *Times* reported, Massee told Simmons that the gun's kick felt the same as it had when he had fired blanks in previous scenes in the movie.

Muzila, who has worked with special-effects charges—called "squibs"—"tons of times," including on several of Steven Seagal's films, addressed the likelihood of such a device contributing to Lee's

debut in the Warner Brothers movie *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1-3), starring opposite of Dolph Lundgren (3, right).



(left).

"Normally, squibs are not a problem at all, unless they are not set up correctly," Muzila said. "With the exception of an incident in which I suffered a minor cut, I have never had a problem with squibs."

The small charges are usually about two or three inches in diameter, made of hard plastic, and have a metal base, he said.

Muzila, who is also an actor, has learned from sources close to people on the set that the squib used in the ill-fated

scene may have been turned toward Lee, rather than away from the actor, and that a piece of metal from the squib may have caused the injury.

"If that is indeed the case, then that is major negligence," Muzila said. "But there are a lot of ways that could happen. They were in the last week of filming, and everyone may have been burned out and not thinking clearly."

Or, Muzila said, perhaps the squib was inadvertently repositioned as Lee moved.

"You can be as safe as you want, but

there is still a chance some weird, freak thing can happen," Muzila said.

Steven Raphael, a spokesman for the Los Angeles-based public relations firm of Clein and White, which represents Crowvision, Inc., producer of *The Crow*, said "There is a good amount of explosives in squibs, but no one ever gets seriously injured by them." Actors may get bruised by the charges, he said, but they wear padding, which reduces the likelihood of injuries.

Although there was no evidence to suggest Lee's untimely end was in any way connected to his father's sudden death in Hong Kong nearly 20 years ago, rumors of a conspiracy nonetheless circulated throughout the martial arts community immediately after Brandon's passing. Simmons, however, discounted this theory and, according to the *Times*, uncovered no indication of ill will toward Brandon on the set of *The Crow*. That didn't stop at least one organization, the International Jeet Kune Do Association, from calling for a federal investigation into Lee's death.

Filming for the project began last February, and only eight shooting days remained when Lee was killed. In the movie, Lee portrays a rock star who is killed by a drug gang, but is reincarnated and avenges his death. Ironically, Lee was shot during filming of the scene in which his character dies.

The day after Lee died, Bob Rosen, executive producer of *The Crow*, issued

1



the following statement: "This is obviously a time of great sorrow. First and foremost, we offer our deepest sympathies to Brandon's family and his fiancée. We have all lost an exceptional talent and a great friend. Brandon will be missed."

The future of *The Crow* production was uncertain following the tragedy.

"All the creative principals will be discussing where the production goes from here," Rosen said. "However, we are all mourning our friend Brandon, and time is needed before we come to final decisions."

"We've had a hard time making a decision about what is the most appropriate thing to do," Rosen added. "But after conversations with some of the actors in the film and members of Brandon's family, we feel we must do everything we can to honor Brandon's memory. There is a great desire to finish this film as a legacy."

Alex Proyas, the film's director, said "We really want to do what is best by Brandon's family. I wouldn't want to do anything without their support."

Said producer Edward Freeman: "During this time for mourning, we will constantly be thinking of Brandon's extraordinary devotion to his work and the spirit he brought to this production as a person and an actor. It is our ultimate hope that if the film can be completed, it is done in a way that Brandon would be proud of."

The film's officials estimated that they would take a month to assess how, or if, the film can be completed.

2



*Young Brandon Lee got an early start in the martial arts, receiving training (1-4) from his legendary father Bruce Lee before he reached the age of four.*

3



Lee was buried next to his father on April 3 in Lake View Cemetery in Seattle. About 40 people attended the private ceremony.

Family, friends and movie industry associates attended a private memorial service the next day at a residence in West Hollywood, California. Actors Steven Seagal, David Carradine and David Hasselhoff, *Black Belt* magazine publisher Michael James, and recording artist Melissa Etheridge, who sang a song in tribute to Lee, were among those who attended.

James described the mood as "somber," but said Lee's mother, Linda, was a pillar of strength. "She cheered everyone up with her strength of character and put everyone at ease," James said. "She encouraged everyone to celebrate his life, rather than mourn his death."

Lee was born in Oakland, California, raised in Los Angeles, and later took drama classes at Emerson College in Massachusetts. He also studied at the Strasberg Academy, an acting school with branches in Los Angeles and New York.

Lee got his first professional acting job at age 20 when he appeared in the television pilot *Kung Fu: The Movie* with David Carradine. Lee's first starring role was in the Hong Kong film *Legacy of Rage*, and he made his American movie debut in the 1991 film *Showdown in Little Tokyo*, starring with Dolph Lundgren. The 1992 release *Rapid Fire* was the first of a three-picture deal Lee negotiated with 20th Century Fox.

Allen Nierob, Lee's publicist, said his client's career was just beginning to blossom.

"He had a huge future in the film business," Nierob said. "Lee had a broad mass appeal nationally and internationally. He was on his way. Not only did he



Brandon Lee (above left) got his first professional acting job at age 20 when he appeared in the television pilot *Kung Fu: The Movie* with David Carradine (above right).

have talent and looks, but he had ability."

Lee was engaged to Eliza Hutton, a 29-year-old Los Angeles resident who had previously worked as a story editor for a film production company. The pair was to be wed April 17.

Friends of Lee were both saddened and shocked by his death.

"At first I thought (the news report) was a mistake," said Carradine, who currently stars in the television series *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*. "When one of our number goes down, it touches me deeply, especially with someone I worked with. We had a lot of fun together. He was easy to get along with and put a lot of effort into his work. I will really miss

him."

Dan Lee, chief instructor at the Southern California Tai Chi Chuan Center in Pasadena, California, and a former training partner of Bruce Lee, heard about Brandon's death while watching the news on television. "It was unexpected, and I was speechless," Lee said. "This was Bruce's only son. It is tragic."

Dan Lee met Brandon when the latter was five years old. According to Lee, Brandon was always nearby when Bruce and Dan trained in the backyard at Bruce's Bel Air, California, residence.

"Bruce used to show Brandon how to do high kicks, and Brandon liked it," Lee said. "He was enthused about training, and when he saw us do things, he tried to imitate us. At this age, I saw his martial arts potential."

Dan Lee said Brandon was humorous, likeable and gentle. "My biggest regret is that I did not spend more time with him," Lee said. "I wish I could have worked out with him and shared some memories of his father with him. The time comes and goes and you miss an opportunity."

Richard Bustillo, director of the IMB Academy in Carson, California, and a close friend of Bruce Lee, saw Brandon "grow from a baby" and described him as a "fun-loving kid." Brandon was "reaching for stardom, and he was going to get it," Bustillo said.

Bustillo taught martial arts to both Brandon and his younger sister Shannon twice a week when they were teenagers. "They were good students, they worked hard and they were respectful," Bustillo said.

Bustillo and Brandon had ridden mo-

*(Continued on page 98)*



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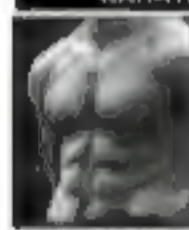
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## BRANDON LEE

Continued from page 29

torcycles together and had planned to take part in a 1991 ride to benefit muscular dystrophy. "As it turned out, we could not go that day because his bike broke down, but he liked to get out in the open and get the wind in his hair," Bustillo said. "I am going to miss him. Jesus, it's hard. I have not even swallowed this yet."

Ted Wong, a jeet kune do instructor in Monterey Park, California, was a close friend of Bruce Lee and spent a great deal of time with the Lee family.

"Brandon reminded me of Bruce in many ways," Wong said. "Not only did he walk and talk like him, but he told jokes and had everyone laughing like his father used to do. I could not believe how similar he was to Bruce."

Wong claims Brandon had a difficult time getting out from under his father's shadow. "He worked hard to establish his own identity, and he was starting to make it," Wong said. "Just like his dad, he was on his way to success, and his death is very, very unfair. It is tragic."

Bob Wall, a Los Angeles-based real estate investor and kickboxing manager

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who appeared in three of Bruce Lee's films, often saw Brandon train with his father.

"They used to train, train, train," Wall said. "Bruce was a great dad, and Brandon loved the martial arts. Brandon was as good as any kid I had ever seen before the age of eight. He hit with power and had good footwork."

Wall last saw Brandon several years ago at a party at Chuck Norris' house. "Brandon asked me a lot of questions about his dad," Wall recalled. "I told him he was dynamic and phenomenal. I loved his dad, and it gave me real pleasure to tell Brandon that his dad was great to me."

Wall said he felt "sickened" when he heard of Brandon's death.

"The first thing that goes through your mind is that someone murdered him," Wall said. "Certainly, however, you can't come to that conclusion, because you need all the facts. But I know that I never heard anyone say anything bad about him."

"This is so sad," Wall added. "Linda raised a great kid, and he was a kid on his way to being a superstar. This is just sickening. My stomach is churning. It is tragic that a kid so nice has to die so tragically and so young."

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